

POLITICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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because she was endowed with exuberant vitality and steeled by a vast ambition. Her husband, she confesses in a revealing phrase, was nothing to her, but not so the throne of Russia. "L'ambition seule me soutenait. . . . En entrant en Russie je m'etais dit: Je regnerai seule ici." When he left the room after his insufferable prattle, the dulllest book seemed a delight. Occasionally we read of tears, more often of gaiety, dances and adventures. " Je ne me suis jamais crue extremement belle, mais je plaisais." Serge Solrikoff, the first of her score of lovers, was a welcome diversion. Her husband, recognizing her intellectual superiority, called her Mme la Ressource. " Si je ne comprends pas les choses moi-meme, ma femme comprend tout." When the impossible Peter III was murdered soon after his accession, the calculating young widow entered on the decades of authority to which she had looked forward so eagerly, holding her own with the leading actors on the European stage. Her fragmentary memoirs are a valuable contribution to our knowledge of the atmosphere of the Russian Court; but their enduring interest is the development of a masterful being who combined the brain of a philosopher, the will of a born ruler, and the frailties of an oversexed woman.

Except for the war of 1914-1918, no event in history has produced so many autobiographies as the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire to which it gave birth. So keen was the appetite for this class of literature that a number of spurious works, such as the memoirs of Fouche, were Sung on the market. To this period belong the first political apologies by women, and that of Mme Roland in particular quivers with passionate life. Yet none of the protagonists in the most moving drama of modern times has left

an autobiography, for most of them perished by the guillotine before they reached middle life.

Napoleon, like many lesser actors, had ample leisure to posture for posterity. He began to dictate reminiscences on the ship which bore him to exile, and at St. Helena he dictated to Las Casas, Gourgaud or Montholon for hours at a time. The *letters from the Cape of Good Hope* published in an English translation in 1817, were the first attempt to restore contact with the outer world. Nominally written by an Englishman, they were in fact dictated by Napoleon, or at any rate composed under his eye and secretly despatched to London. British sympathy, he hoped, might be aroused by the story of his sufferings. The *Oeuvres de Napoleon* fill volumes 29-32 of the